

## DOSSIER

## TOWARDS A MILITIA STATE? THE ROLE OF SUDANESE SECURITY INSTITUTIONS IN A CHANGING POLITICAL ECONOMY

AN INTERVIEW WITH MEDHANE TADESSE  
BY EMMANUELLE VEUILLET

This interview examines the contemporary political and economic trajectory of the Sudanese State. Starting out from the outbreak of the war between the armed forces of the Sudanese government under the leadership of Abdel Fattah al Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under the command of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo on 15 April 2023, the objective of this conversation was to examine the recent changes in the state institutions and security apparatus and the role played by various domestic and international actors. The main argument put forward by Medhane Tadesse, who has been a close observer of the process, is that the Sudanese state is gradually turning to a militia state as a result of the growing role and influence acquired by the RSF in the accumulation, allocation and distribution of state resources.

*Medhane Tadesse is a well-known public figure in Ethiopian academia, and a prominent intellectual in the Horn of Africa. He is a specialist in peace and security issues in Africa who has researched and lectured widely on regional conflicts and the governance of security, and he has extensive knowledge of geopolitics, the governance of security, political Islam and interstate conflict at both research and policy levels among others. He also led the development of the National Security Policy of the new Republic of South Sudan.*

*The interview was conducted by Emmanuelle Veuillet, a French social scientist whose research focuses on South Sudan's contemporary political economy. Through her work, she has produced a thorough and original analysis of the established regime of inequality and its underlying logics of accumulation and ethnicisation through a detailed investigation of contemporary mobilisations and the recent civil war, and the experiences arising out of them.*

**Emmanuelle Veuillet:** After the war broke out in Sudan, a very common narrative emerged that the war was the result of a failure of the security sector reform (SSR). More precisely, people pointed to the tensions that



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**arose among military actors around the question of security arrangements and SSR.**

**Several of Sudan's international and Western partners, especially the UN mission in Sudan, had been looking at SSR as a cornerstone of the transition and a panacea for Sudan's problems at the time. Once it had been concluded, this security sector reform should – at least in their minds – have put Sudan on the right track to democracy. Based on your own work and expertise on SSR as a researcher and a professional on the subject, what is your view of the security arrangements and the SSR that were announced for Sudan and ultimately implemented?**

Medhane Tadesse: Certainly, it's kind of always the same type of narrative we've found on Sudan, mainly since the start of the war. But the claim that the tensions surrounding the integration of different forces, including the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)<sup>1</sup>, into the existing armed and security forces led to the conflict is not accurate. Indeed, it has been rather overblown. The SSR didn't lead to the war in Sudan. Of course, it might have been a related cause, but there are deeper economic, social, political and military factors that led to the war. SSR itself rarely leads to war, and the Sudanese case is not unique in this. SSR is often phoney, and doesn't lead to any kind of solution if the political issues are not addressed in the first place and if there's no detailed political agreement on the security arrangements. I have worked on SSR processes in several countries in Africa, and it is commonly observed that SSRs are in many ways superficial. In Sudan particularly, if we look at the country's recent history, most of the SSR processes have been narrowly conceived. They have focused mainly on the army and paramilitary forces rather than embracing a broader understanding of the security sector – by bringing in the judiciary and the police, for example, or by addressing people's important day-to-day security needs.

That said, if we only look at the security sector reforms, I would say that there was a triple deficit. First, most of the security arrangements were rushed into and were never fully understood or adopted by the parties. Security transition needs time. In countries like Sudan, because of the nature of the state and security institutions, before you move on to DDR and SSR you need to consider security sector integration. In Sudan, there weren't any agreed-on strong security arrangements that might have led to DDR and then SSR. This was compounded by a dearth of expertise on security arrangements. Armed groups are considered to lack expertise in security arrangements, which makes them vulnerable, and

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1. The Rapid Support Forces are led by General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, who is also known as Hemedti, and the Sudanese Armed Forces are commanded by General Abdel-Fattah Burhan. Both men were senior leaders of the Sudan Sovereign Council after the revolution, but remained at the head of two separate military forces, which they failed to integrate.

the lesson here is that they should be provided with some sort of assistance. Except in very few cases, in the agreements that have been signed between the Sudanese government, the NCP<sup>2</sup> and various armed groups, there has never been this kind of expert support and this comes at the expense of the armed groups, which are not familiar with these procedures. The rebel leaders weren't able to understand the lengthy, highly technical documents that were presented to them, and on top of that there was the use of deadline diplomacy, which rushed them into signing. The rebels signed documents they had zero or little knowledge about and later reneged, saying they hadn't agreed on such and such a provision.

Second, the political situation needs to be mature before you do DDR, SSR and so on because the success of these processes lies in confidence-building and creating mutual trust among the actors. This might be achieved by providing security, some level of delivery of services to the population or ensuring the safe return of IDPs. People need to see a minimum level of guarantees. For example, if there are no economic guarantees for former combatants to earn a livelihood or no political guarantees to address their security and that of local communities, you can't expect there to be demobilisation. This was the challenge in the aftermath of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA),<sup>3</sup> which was only signed by two of the four main rebel groups, making the future of the rebel fighters and disarmament of the Janjaweed a highly contentious issue<sup>4</sup>. The rebels were not confident enough to lay down their arms, and the Government of Sudan then staged the disarmament of fewer than 200 people. Besides this, there was a widespread view in Darfur that the DPA did not compensate the population adequately for its losses. The people of Darfur saw no benefits from the DPA – indeed, the violence increased – which eroded their trust in the agreement even further. All these things are interconnected. The necessary “security transition mechanisms” from the ceasefire to the DDR and from the DDR to the SSR have never been attempted coherently and efficiently. This is why we can't even say there was a serious SSR process, or even a programme, in Sudan before the war.

Thirdly, there was no overarching SSR plan with a detailed implementation strategy, from the integration of the armed forces to the demilitarisation of politics and economics. It's no wonder that control of the economy, particularly military-run enterprises, would become one of the most contentious issues between the RSF and the SAF, the Sudanese Armed Forces, in 2023. It's like drawing up DDR and SSR without a compass, as happened in the aftermath of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) [signed in 2020]. Political actors and rebel leaders prioritised their positions in government over gradually working out the details of security sector integration, or the democratic transition of Sudan and

2. The National Congress Party, which ruled Sudan for the majority of Beshir's rule.

3. See C. Deshayes, “De la révolution à la guerre au Soudan. Fragmentation politique, concurrence pour le contrôle de l'Etat et généralisation du conflit”, in this special issue

4. “Sudan: Saving the Darfur Peace Agreement” [online], Reliefweb, 21 August 2006, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-saving-darfur-peace-agreement>>, accessed on 28 March 2024.

the needs of the local people for that matter. The JPA and the integration of rebel combatants were definitely part of Hemedti's tactic to gain support and balance the power that had been acquired by civilian revolutionaries in the transitional government and the army. But the fractures among the parties and the fact that many groups were left out once again meant that this process failed. In my view, if significant players are left out, it's not comprehensive and implementation will be difficult. Also, in countries like Sudan, security integration and SSR need to consider the issues surrounding the devolution of power in any variant of a federal arrangement in which local actors agree on their preferences for the structure of local security and the provision of justice in their areas. This means that any arrangement at a national level needs to be replicated and contextualised at all levels, which is something that has yet to be done.

So to sum up, if we only look at the security arrangements and transitional mechanisms put in place in Sudan, I believe there was a real paucity of knowledge of the details among the parties and a lack of a political compact that might ensure confidence-building, and consequently an absence of guarantees, negative time pressures placed on the actors by external backers and a lack of comprehensiveness and inclusivity.

**E. V.: The flaws and limitations of the security arrangements and the partly standardised SSR mechanisms you've just mentioned need to be underlined. However, what you've just said demonstrates that SSR policies aren't the core of the problem. The necessary political and security transition and a departure from the unequal, exploitative and authoritarian character of the former regime weren't addressed by these reforms.**

M. T.: Indeed, and one thing we need to be cautious about is that SSR is less technical than it is political. By this I mean that discussions usually focus closely on technicalities or sequencing – a ceasefire agreement, the creation of commissions, the DDR mechanisms, quotas, the number of forces, etc. – that are all part of “international best practices”. But they don't touch on the central issue – the type and nature of the state people want – which is an unresolved and thorny problem. Before tackling SSR issues, you have to look at these central political matters. You need to question the type of transformation the centre needs to undertake in order to bring about the expected changes. In Sudan, the causes of wars always lie in the centre and its relationship with the peripheries. The root cause of the current crisis can also be found there, and in this respect Sudan is not unique. But Sudan has its own historical dimensions, because it is one of a handful of cases, one of the few conquering states in Africa, that has been built on these specific centre-periphery relations, which were inherited from the Ottomans. It is a rapacious relationship that is based on the violent exploitation of the peripheries. The Sudanese elite reproduced this mode of government

and adopted the same political culture the occupiers had left behind. On top of this, violence has been subcontracted to the militias for quite some time now<sup>5</sup>. The state was rapacious and violent, and it acted in this way with the help and support of militias, and over time the state itself was turning into a militia State, which is an under-researched phenomenon. We always say that the NISS [the National Intelligence and Security Services] captured the Sudanese state years ago. Everything was about the NISS! But these days the Sudanese state is being captured by a militia group and its external backers. It is a truism that the Sudanese state had a militia, and now the militia will have the state.

Finally, after the fall of the Al Beshir regime, Sudan had to face multiple transitions, or at least that is how it had to be envisaged. There was a transition from war to peace, a transition from military rule to democracy or a civilian-led government, and a transition from an Islamist type of command economy to a liberal capitalist type of economy, as well as a security mechanism transition. There was also a change in the conduct of Sudanese foreign relations – unlike during the Beshir era, when for whatever it was worth one group was able to monopolise external relations – to multiple actors vying for attention and overrunning the foreign office, sometimes through conflicting and contradictory commitments, particularly with the West and the Gulf, with state and non-state actors capturing the realm of external relations and repurposing it for their own specific ends. This dynamic defies the long-established norm that the state is the only entity at play in an international system. In any case, all these transitions are interrelated, and they were mostly precipitated by the arrival of the RSF.

**E. V.: You mentioned three major points here that I would like to pursue in our discussion: the nature of the Sudanese state, the type of political economy attached to the state and finally the specific and changing involvement of regional and international powers with the Sudanese state. These three elements seem to be quite central to improving our understanding of the current crisis on the one hand and the trajectory of the Sudanese state on the other.**

**But before we go any further, it could be important to clarify the role played by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) during the Al Beshir regime and since its downfall, during the transition. The RSF was formed by Omar Al Beshir's regime in 2013 to absorb the different militias known under the name of Janjaweed into the state. These militias had formerly been used**

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5. Almost all wars in the peripheries from South Sudan to Blue Nile, the Nuba Mountains or Darfur have been fought by militias subcontracted by Sudan's military intelligence. The Sudanese military has rarely been part of these counter-insurgencies, with the state choosing to mobilise militias on the cheap.

by the Sudanese government to fight rebel movements in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile. So before being labelled as the RSF, they had already been integrated into the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the Border Guards and the Popular Defence Forces from 2006 on following the war in Darfur. On top of being one of the main combatant parties in the current war, the RSF, which is led and was formed by Mohammad Dagalo, who is also known as Hemedti, is playing a very important role in Sudan's political economy, as you alluded to earlier. Could you elaborate on this a little more, especially on the evolution of their position over time?

M. T.: It was clear that RSF was instrumental in the war in Darfur against the rebel groups fighting the regime. We have to keep in mind that they were brought into the security apparatus by Omar Al Beshir himself without an overarching legal framework. This was unique in the sense that the RSF should have been accommodated or integrated after some sort of peace agreement had been signed, after a political dialogue or consultations had been held on its future role, and then DDR, SSR or integration would have followed. But the RSF was brought on board without any of that, in a rushed way with a mere authorisation from Al Beshir. It was made welcome and housed in Khartoum with its own barracks. It was given an official status without the government having to reform the security laws or create a new legal framework. It was simply parachuted in. The militia became the main providers of security in the capital and of support in foreign wars. It conducted itself as a legitimate security actor in the country without having any accountability structure to respect, or even oversight from Parliament or the Defence Ministry or any other security institution. Secondly, the RSF militias, which are mostly Arabic, were given government approval – or a kind of “don't announce and don't deny” permission – to become involved in a number of economic activities. Al Beshir was a full accomplice of the militias, and supported their economies, which were mostly forged around gold mining and smuggling. The very profitable deals the militias made with the European Union and the Gulf States weren't contested, and were perhaps even endorsed by Al Beshir. So you see, in the case of Sudan, it wasn't just about militias being used to wage war or being informally integrated into the security apparatus. They became embedded in the Sudanese political economy. It was a two-step process. First, the militias were included as an arm of the Sudanese security institutions with no legal framework or legal supervision specifying their roles and their missions. Second, they managed to enter the political economy, including in the conduct of foreign relations, and repurposed it to suit their own interests.

**E. V.: So in your opinion, Al Beshir's regime marked a kind of turning point in the ascendancy of the militias within state institutions, enabling them to redraw the logics of accumulation and redistribution of resources based**



**on their own interests, and by so doing to transform Sudan's political economy?**

M. T.: Yes. The RSF made a stealthy entry and sneaked into military politics as they were positioned at the centre of the system set up by Al Beshir. Al Beshir himself came to power in a coup, and so he was very much aware of the risk he would be taking if the army or military intelligence were to be too powerful, particularly because once the resources of patronage dwindled, he wouldn't be able to buy off or trust these powerful security institutions [the army and the NISS] comfortably. Having these militias was viewed as a central means not only of waging war in Darfur but also of disempowering the other security institutions. In a way, Al Beshir sabotaged himself and the residual Sudanese state security institutions when he took that decision. He also allowed the militias to act as representatives of the Sudanese state by sending them abroad on behalf of the state, partly to secure funds from the Gulf through military diplomacy. The militias were contracted by Libya, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates with Al Beshir's consent.

Likewise, on the economics side, the militias were given a blank cheque by the regime to set up their economic activities, particularly illegal ones. In recent years, especially since the independence of South Sudan and the loss of oil revenues, the militias have come to control the country's remaining principal sources of income. Gold is definitely one of the most profitable national resources, compounded by the foreign remittances paid to the state to reward its military support. During the time of Al Beshir, therefore, we went from a complete Islamist military state using militias to secure some sort of territorial or political control in the peripheries to a militia morphing within the state, or even becoming the state. We have reached a situation where if you want to reform the state, it is the "militia state" you must reform, and the odds are even longer because you have to deal with the militia itself, which has entered the state. The current war is a good illustration of the fact that the state's instruments of control and war, which used to be the militias, are now rebelling against the state, creating a highly unique situation.

**E. V.: The situation you have described seems unique, even from South Sudan, I would say. The militias in South Sudan have never played this kind of role in conducting state politics and its economy, which has always remained under the control of government actors linked to the army and the security services. Even though the South Sudanese state institutions are fragmented and not well institutionalised, and a part of the security services does function as militias, the state institutions and members of the government remain in the driving seat. They were never disempowered by the militias they had once mobilised, and continue to mobilise.**



**Conversely, in Sudan, we see state institutions being taken over by the militias. In the economic sector especially we see the militias almost ousting the army and the NISS from their CEO positions.**

M. T.: Completely, and even more so. The RSF had been requesting direct access to economic sectors that were controlled by the military, and it was given some, but it continued to ask for more, which became a bone of contention. The RSF wasn't sharing its own businesses, and it was also encroaching into traditionally military-dominated economic spheres. Perhaps it is more than mere happenstance that in 2023 they first attacked army positions in the east of the country, which has gold deposits that were outside the RSF's control. We really have a scenario of a militia capturing the state and its political economy. In South Sudan you have various security institutions that are arming communities and groups, but not to the extent of making them powerful enough to replace their own role, at least not yet.

**E. V.: How might we explain such a turnaround in terms of power dynamics? How was it possible for the RSF to overrun the military and the NISS, which were two very powerful institutions in Sudan? What does this say about the changes within the security apparatus?**

M. T.: As I said, Al Beshir gave the militias an autonomous space within which to operate, and he left these two other institutions quite disoriented, or at least in a defensive mode in comparison. Al Beshir was thinking about his fate and the fate of his regime. He was afraid he would be overrun and handed over to the International Court of Justice. The RSF was a kind of insurance policy for his regime. Once it was in Khartoum, it could not easily be removed. It is very strong, and it was too late for its potential opponents to try to contain or control it. Also, the NISS and the army had their own issues and internal divisions. When the National Islamic Front (NIF) came to power in 1989, the military served as a vehicle. Initially, it was highly ideological, but no political position is immune to the passage of events and the march of time, and its wounds were self-inflicted. A decade later, these institutions were badly damaged by internal squabbles that weakened their earlier confidence and capacity for self-determination, which goes back to President Beshir's acrimonious relationship with Al Turabi<sup>6</sup>. So the military had its own divisions between the officers who supported the Islamists and the rest. Of course, when we talk about the army and Islamists in Sudan there are different strands and sub-groups, but there has also been a

6. Hassan abd Allah al-Turabi was an influential figure in Sudanese politics who masterminded the 1989 coup that brought al-Beshir to power, but a split emerged between the two in 1999 that weakened the regime, and Turabi formed the Popular Congress Party (PCP).

fracture within the military itself since then. This fracture was deepened by both the reduced economic resources the elite has been rallying around and the role of external actors. You had international pressures and the strengthening position of the Gulf powers, except for Qatar and Egypt, which came to hate the role of the Islamists. When Beshir was forced to mend relations, he had to reorder his priorities. The position given to the militias in the state greatly weakened the traditional security agencies, as well as the patronage systems that had been built over the years by the Northern elites.

Also, apart from these internal divisions, the regime found itself in great economic difficulty. The economic crisis, plus the sanctions faced by the Sudanese regime, caused Al Beshir's government to starve. After South Sudan's independence and the consequent loss of oil revenues, the government was looking for other resources to feed itself. This is why you saw all these informal economies flourishing. They became the main ways for the regime to sustain itself, before Al Beshir's downfall and even after. The loss of the revenues from oil in South Sudan and the deepening economic crisis in Sudan should not be underestimated. The regime and its political economy became completely dependent on artisanal mining of different sorts of minerals, gold being one of them, and on cash from the Gulf States. The state had to depend more on Middle Eastern powers to access cash, and the Gulf directly helped keep the economy afloat. Even though we can't demonstrate that every single cent from the Gulf States or gold mining ended up in the hands of the RSF, there is a strong presumption that this was the case.

We see that the increasing influence of the RSF ran parallel to its growing economic and political ties to the Gulf States, especially the Emirates. This leverage the RSF has in any political negotiations is because of the economic power and patronage it has acquired. There was no collective and coherent position or potential resistance to the rise of the militias, especially once the Sudanese state lost its sources of revenue and was not able to sustain the same patronage system. The loss of key revenues by the state is one aspect of deinstitutionalisation.

**E. V.: While at the same time, the historic backers of the army and the NISS had also curtailed their financial support, even more so after Al Beshir was ousted.**

M. T.: Yes. Various partners such as Turkey and Qatar became nervous, which made their support less prominent than it had been in previous years. After the revolution they became anxious, and they weren't able to balance the rise of the influence of the two Gulf States, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Al Sissi's government in Egypt also had issues with backing the Sudanese regime. They wanted to support the army although

they had problems with the Islamists, especially with the Muslim Brotherhood, as you know. Their position has always been quite a tricky one of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the Sudanese army even though they differ ideologically with the leadership. Support from the Egyptian government has tended to decrease recently because of its own economic situation and more recently the war between Israel and Hamas, which has become its main priority.

Nonetheless, even before the war broke out, the type of support the army was receiving from these Islamist-leaning countries like Qatar and Turkey wasn't comparable to the support from the Emirates and the Saudis for the regime and the RSF. The money given by the Gulf States to the Sudanese Central Bank to prevent a complete economic breakdown was unprecedented, and no one knows the type of conditionalities they attached to this money. So if the countries that have been supporting the RSF for many years, especially the UAE, have now become the patrons of the Sudanese state, how can we be surprised that RSF gained such leverage in Sudan?

**E. V.: What about the various historic armed opposition groups labelled as rebel movements that are present in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile? We haven't mentioned them at all. What role are they playing in this current (political) situation?**

M. T.: Their position very much depends on the balance of power, which is now also shifting. Before the outbreak of the war in Sudan, the rebel movements thought they would be integrated into the government and get a share of the cake. But as the national cake doesn't exist any longer, the situation is different. Remember, the revolution came about because of popular protests, not thanks to armed groups. Armed groups joined the sovereign council after 2019 to secure a position in the government. They were interested in a potential security arrangement that would integrate their forces into it, not in backing the agenda of the popular protests. In actual fact, they tend to view these civilian forces as a kind of recycled riverine elite made up of the same social classes that have historically been against them – the middle classes, professionals based in Khartoum and the educated class. They thought that by siding and working with the army and the RSF they would be a greater threat to the riverine elite, but because of the nature of war and the history of ethnicity in Sudan, their position became more complex and they became trapped. As you know, the RSF is historically opposed to most of these armed groups. It is the RSF that launched direct attacks against their communities, the Masalit, the Fur and others, so for this reason, these rebel groups might consider switching sides and allying with the army to protect their people, as had already been the case in various places. The people in Darfur are considered to be non-Arabs – I mean they are looked down on by the riverine elite – and then in Darfur itself, the Arabs look down

on the Black population. Dagalo's family favours a certain segment of society. But in reality, what power do these armed groups and rebel movements have to oppose the RSF? In terms of fighting capacity, the advantage is still on the side of the RSF. I mean, even if it were to make an alliance with the SAF, the SAF is still in a very weak position.

**E. V.: On top of marginalising specific Sudanese state and non-state actors, what effects did the rise of the RSF and the Gulf States have on political and economic structures in Sudan? I mean, was it only a matter of power redistribution within a similar political system and productive context at the expense of the military and the NISS, or did they participate in bringing about a new system?**

M. T.: The Sudanese political economy has changed, and it is still changing. First, in terms of the economic resources feeding the system, oil used to be the central resource of the political economy and the military, the Islamist regime under the NCP, controlled these revenues. They used these petrodollars to sustain their regime, to develop the infrastructures around Khartoum and to feed a patronage system. By then, the military had its own military-industrial complex. Besides, Sudan had important agricultural resources aside from gum arabic, which was a very large source of export revenues. But these resources are no longer at the centre of the Sudanese economy and its exports as they used to be. The loss of oil revenues combined with the economic crisis put an end to the previous system and the sanctions imposed on Sudan depleted the regime's remaining resources. Mining and smuggling became very central. The militarisation of the Red Sea also had an impact on the Sudanese political economy. The attempt to make Port Sudan into a major port by leasing or subcontracting it has become a new dimension of the state economy. These potential economic resources are important things to consider. We need to not only look at the existing resources in order to understand the agenda of these internal and external actors and the current power relationships. Also, if we look at it this way, the resources that have the greatest potential to generate revenues are under the control of the RSF right now, apart from the few strategic assets in Northern and Eastern Sudan. This is why the UAE and the RSF are working together on this. It's not simply because of the war in Yemen or the resources in Darfur or Eastern Sudan. The RSF is the player with the greatest control over the current and potential resources in Sudan.

Secondly, it's not state institutions or the riverine elite that control the resources in terms of wealth extraction in this militia state, but the RSF. Deinstitutionalisation is everywhere, including in the economy, apart from in military and foreign relations, as I mentioned. The economy is increasingly relying on transnational flows, trade, and smuggling, which are mostly in the

hands of the RSF. Unlike in the past, the political economy will be much more controlled by the Dagalo family, with its own shadow, informal economy. So a new kind of coercive capitalism is emerging in Sudan.

Thirdly, I see that this new political economy is building on a dynamic of de-developmentalism<sup>7</sup>. We had expected some kind of economic and political reconstruction in Sudan after the revolution and the Juba Peace Agreement, but what is happening now is the opposite. What is happening is political and economic de-development. We saw that the political economy is different in terms of the actors controlling the economy and the resources at stake, and has taken on a more transnational character. As I see it, the rise of the RSF will go hand in hand with the progressive mobilisation of specific tribes all over Western Sudan, including the Sahel. This will be unmanageable. Violence and rebellion will have a transnational character, with groups turning to transnational actors with the potential for calling existing borders into question: perhaps we might expect a redrawing of borders across the sub-region, which will question their very relevance.

Last but not least, the emergence of the RSF, whether in the political economy, security or any other kind of arrangement, will further deepen the marginalisation of various Sudanese political communities, especially in Darfur, to the extent that they will become vulnerable to genocide. Genocide is an instrument it can use to change the demographics on the ground, as we have seen<sup>8</sup>. The local communities, mainly the Black communities in these areas, are not only facing marginalisation, oppression and exploitation; they are even facing the risk of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

**E. V.: How do you see these dynamics being translated into a particular mode of government in the long run? To what extent has the RSF shaped a new political system by transforming ways of accumulating, distributing and protecting (state) resources, and how does this translate into the political alliances forged by the RSF on the ground?**

M. T.: The fact is that the RSF is a different kind of construct. It's not an elite-based movement or an ideologically guided organisation. It doesn't have any particular nationalist or governing coalition. It's a merger of shadow militias with a racial background. It won't have a formal economy or formal delivery of services. It won't have a conventional development agenda and it won't have the type of politics you would expect. The RSF lacks this kind of governing agenda

7. M. Duffield and N. Stockton, "How Capitalism is Destroying the Horn of Africa: Sheep and the Crisis in Somalia and Sudan", *Review of African Political Economy*, 2023.

8. A. de Waal, "Genocidal Warfare in North-East Africa", in D. Bloxham and A. D. Moses (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 529-549.

and governing infrastructure. I don't see even local-level government structures emerging in the areas it has controlled since the war began. Even in Darfur, I don't see local authentic, legitimate structures emerging. That's why I think the RSF will have difficulty creating a governance infrastructure in Sudan without the support of other Northern elites. It doesn't have the human resources and it doesn't have the experience of governing multi-ethnic areas. What it has been trained to do is simply to fight, loot and extract, and later on it turned to being mercenaries and to smuggling and trafficking. It is expert in a different kind of political economy such as smuggling, very much like the Rashida of Eastern Sudan and Eritrea<sup>9</sup>.

Maybe it'll improvise once it's in power, as many groups have. It might get support from different groups. In particular, because it can pay its recruits and soldiers, it'll continue to attract the young, the unemployed and unpaid soldiers. It might also attract support from some elites, mainly the mid-ranking elites. This idea of popular Islam is also there to expand its popularity among rank-and-file soldiers, a kind of political Islam that's attractive to the masses, the downtrodden and people who have become marginalised by the greed of the Islamist elite. At least, I would say, Hemedti has the inclination to carry out such an agenda. He might emerge as the populist leader of the poor, including in the peripheries, within a broader Islamist movement.

But because of the nature of its emergence, its origins and its relations with its external partners, the RSF will continue to exploit these lawless zones of resource extraction rather than develop government-controlled revenues to ensure the delivery of services and redistribution. The empowerment of the RSF will just deepen the "militiafication" of Sudan, which might also become a trend elsewhere in the Horn and Northeast Africa. Sudan shows us how state-led governance is waning, and the tentacles of some kind of post-Westphalian state. What we see is a Sudanese state that is dying in instalments, bit by bit. Most of its tentacles – the economy, foreign policy, the political economy, resources and security issues – are being taken away and ending up in the hands of the militia. There is a concurrent and progressive militarisation and mobilisation of the periphery as well as a fragmentation of the centre. This is what I call militiafication. If the RSF wins and try to govern Sudan, we'll see what happens. But it's very challenging, highly challenging... To see Sudan being taken over by the RSF is worrying, and it will have a ripple effect all over the region because of the ties, because of the nature of the political economy, because of the nature of ethnic affiliations, because of the nature of porous borders. The international community should definitely look at these trends and their transnational character.

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9. The Rashida are an ethnic group who inhabit the coastal strip along the Red Sea straddling Eastern Sudan to North-western Eritrea and are known experts in smuggling and kidnapping. They often work with Sudanese intelligence and the Eritrean military.

**E. V.: Before concluding this conversation, I would like to examine the role of external actors and the regional dynamics that shape the current trajectory of the state and its accumulative strategies a little further. I would like you to give us more details about the potential conflicting agendas these different external actors have as neighbours, the Gulf States as well as Western powers, especially the United States and the European Union. First, how would you give a meaning to the changing involvement of Middle Eastern countries and Gulf States?**

M. T.: All the neighbouring countries have some level of involvement in Sudan, particularly Egypt, Eritrea and to some extent Ethiopia. Sometimes they are pursuing their own security agendas autonomously, but in recent years they have increasingly aligned their attention and interests with Gulf and Middle Eastern powers. The involvement of Middle Eastern powers in Sudan is quite complicated, as we saw earlier, because of the divisions within Middle Eastern countries, with these two political blocs around the Sunni and the Shia, and the divide within the Sunni camp between the Muslim Brotherhood and the other movements, though this gap seems to have been bridged in recent months. If we take Egypt, for example, its position is to support the army to support the survival of the state. The disintegration of the Sudanese state is what they want to avoid at any cost. This is the line that has been drawn by Egypt for the sake of its own interests. This agenda is close to that of Saudi Arabia in a sense because the Saudis are suspicious of what the UAE is doing in the Red Sea. Because of this competition with the UAE, the Saudis don't want to lend their full support to the RSF.

Although America tried to use the Gulf States as its proxies, it's actually the Gulf States that are using both Sudanese actors and the Americans as proxies for achieving their agenda and in their competition for control of the Red Sea. The key geopolitical change here has been that former Gulf allies of the US and security partners of the West have become bold enough to be self-determining, and have begun to act against Western interests in terms of values and principles. The relative demobilisation of the USA in the Middle East provided an opening for these "middle and meddling powers" to operate independently in a bid to reverse the trend that's been shaped by the West. Interestingly, they're using the same financial instruments as the West to promote democracy in Africa and the rest of the world, but in their case, they are using their wealth to create regimes that are not necessarily an "exact version" of themselves, but something remotely similar to it: autocratic regimes. The Arab Spring and the protests for democratic transition have long been a major source of anxiety for the Gulf powers ruled by monarchies. They detest democratic political transition, and prefer to prop up and work with strongmen. That said, the Gulf powers believe that the Red Sea should be an Arab security zone but disagree among themselves on who should have control. The UAE is constantly acting to become a Red Sea power. This is why they – or at least the UAE – are supporting



the efforts of the RSF and the Ethiopian Prime Minister to become a main player.

**E. V.: So looking at other neighbouring countries like Ethiopia, as you just mentioned, and Eritrea, how involved are they in the current war? What is their relationship to the RSF and the army? To what extent did they contribute more or less directly to and (expect to) benefit from these recent transformations of the Sudanese state?**

M. T.: Eritrea's leader is definitely trying to take advantage of the situation and make his way in Sudan, especially in Eastern Sudan. Securing access to Eastern Sudan is crucial for Isaias Afwerki for two reasons. First, Eritrea's economy depends on transborder and transnational networks for smuggling<sup>10</sup>, Sudan at war is a profitable lawless zone or transit country. Eritrea doesn't have any problem with the conflict as long as it has access to these territories and transnational smuggling networks. Second, Afwerki wants to maintain direct access to Ethiopia through Sudan in order to continue to support Amhara groups in their fight against the Abiy regime.

At first, Eritrea tended to favour the RSF as they aspire to the same type of political economy: Eritrea's government has its own gangster economy, like the RSF. But since Port Sudan became the *de facto* seat of the Sudanese government and because Afwerki doesn't have cordial relations with the Emirati leaders, Eritrea had to work with the SAF and Al Burhan. Also, as most of the tribes in Eastern Sudan, such as the Beja, are supported by Eritrea, it gives Eritrea a certain leverage in its alliance with the warring parties in Sudan. Willingly or not, Al Burhan has to coexist with Eritrea.

So all in all, Eritrea has good relations with both. Right now, most of its cards are with the SAF, and by extension Egypt and the Saudis. If the RSF expands into Eastern Sudan, Eritrea would have to accept the reality on the ground and start improvising, and perhaps change sides, as contrary to popular belief, its leader has previously been risk-averse when the potential military odds have not been in his favour. For the time being, it's the Ethiopian government that wants the RSF to expand to its borders and to the North towards Eritrea, partly because Abiy has come to consider Hemedti as a new ally, mainly due to his ties to the UAE. Addis is happily serving as an accessory to the UAE security missions in the region, partly for financial reasons, but also because of Abiy's regional

10. The Eritrean government's involvement in the smuggling trade is widely known and documented, such as in the study by Leiden University. See M. van Reizen, "Eritrean Regime Trades its own Nationals in a Billion-Dollar Trafficking Business" [online], Universiteit Leiden, 9 March 2017 <<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2017/03/eritraen-regime-trades-own-citizens-in-billion-dollar-human-trafficking-industry>>, accessed on 28 March 2024.

ambitions, quest for relevance and dependence on external funding. The RSF's potential victory and its intrusion into Gedaref province wouldn't be looked on unfavourably in Addis, as it would consolidate the encirclement of Tigray by UAE-backed forces, with the exception of Eritrea. For now, Eritrea is hosting and training pro-Burhan militias, including groups from Darfur. The Ethiopian federal government would also probably welcome a push by the RSF towards the Ethiopian border, as unlike the SAF generals, the RSF's commanders don't currently seem to be interested in Al Fashaga and sesame cultivation, although this might change if they controlled Gedaref province, of course (Al Fashaga was re-occupied by the Sudanese army in December 2020, taking advantage of the war in Tigray). If this happens, we'll have kingpins and not political leaders in the Horn. If the RSF comes to power, there will be a belt of genocidal regimes in the region, with Abiy, Afwerki, and Hemedti. Besides, deinstitutionalisation has been a part of Eritrea's trajectory, and it's now happening everywhere, including in Ethiopia, as Abiy thinks the dispersal of violence serves his political needs, and he uses violence as a governing tool very much as happened in Beshir's Sudan. Subcontracting foreign affairs to a Gulf power or subscribing to the UAE's lawless zones of extraction is a core aspect of the regional political economy. And what are the Western powers doing? Simply watching...

**E. V.: I found it surprising at the outset of the war not to see a stronger reaction or a higher degree of involvement from the United States and European countries, especially if you take into consideration the actual and potential spillovers from a war like this in the region.**

M. T.: The USA and the European Union have lost leverage in Sudan. This illustrates a broader disruption of global power relations, and they have long abandoned a serious normative agenda, at least since 2016-2017. They have to make this reality check as well. It's not only the emergence of powers that don't subscribe to the normative framework of democracy, development and human rights, like the Gulf powers; they themselves have defected. There have been defections at two levels: in terms of policy and foreign policy engagement, but also in terms of values. As we have been discussing, the European Union relegated human rights and democracy by dealing directly with the militia group, as the Americans have done everywhere. There has also been a reversal in values in the Western world that we might call the end of liberal internationalism or international liberalism. The new powers don't subscribe to their principles and they themselves – the Western powers – have abandoned them. Nobody is taking these normative principles seriously. The whole issue of development is being overtaken by militarisation and military engagement. Multilateralism is being taken over by transactional foreign policy. Everything has become transactional, militarist, unilateral and more nationalist.

Even before the war broke out, European countries were part of the problem as they contributed to the militiafication of the Sudanese state. The European Union helped strengthen the RSF and to make its ascent possible through its migration policies, even before the war in Yemen and before the RSF militias were parachuted in there. In 2015, the European countries developed a very weird security policy that is the antithesis of any kind of pro-democracy or human rights agenda. They came up with the idea of training and equipping militias to secure migration corridors and fight human trafficking. This was a very short-term and realistic perspective on the part of the Europeans. I remember travelling to Amsterdam to address the European Presidency on this. I asked how after having invested a lot of money in SSR in Africa they could now revert to something like an American type of military support because of a rise in populism within their borders. Migration became very important to them, and other pledges were relegated to non-priority positions. European countries are changing their tune from shared values guidance to shared interests. What they did by financing such policies in Sudan and the Sahara had implications for several African countries and jeopardised SSR in many places. So a part of the failure of the peace agreement and the transition in Sudan is also because the Europeans and Americans have not been serious about SSR. In practice, the Europeans, the Americans and the UN contributed to the militiafication of the State, and in actual terms they have become enemies of SSR in Sudan. It is insane to claim that they have been supporting SSR and democratic transitions in Sudan. The empirical indications prove otherwise.

Finally, in Sudan you can see very clearly how these internal and external factors are contributing to shaping a very peculiar political economy. It's as if the external and internal factors, beyond simple academic jargon, have met perfectly. Sudan is a very important lens through which to examine these different dynamics at play because of the changes in global politics, superpower and middle power rivalries, competition in the Red Sea, the militiafication of the state, the importance of borders, the transnational nature of security threats and the coming of age of transnational actors, and perhaps the emergence of a different kind of statehood in many parts of Africa ■

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*Résumé***Vers un État milicien ? Le rôle des institutions de sécurité soudanaises dans une économie politique en évolution**

*Cet entretien est une analyse de la trajectoire contemporaine de l'État soudanais. En prenant comme point de départ la guerre opposant les forces armées du gouvernement soudanais, dirigées par Abdel Fattah al Burhan, aux Forces de soutien rapide (RSF), sous le commandement de Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, qui débute le 15 avril 2023, cet entretien examine les transformations récentes intervenues au niveau des institutions étatiques et de l'appareil de sécurité, et le rôle qu'ont joué divers acteurs nationaux et internationaux. Le principal argument avancé par Medhane Tadesse, en tant qu'observateur privilégié des processus décrits, est que l'État soudanais se transformerait progressivement en un « État-milice », du fait du rôle et de l'influence croissants acquis par les RSF, notamment dans l'accumulation et la distribution des ressources de l'État.*